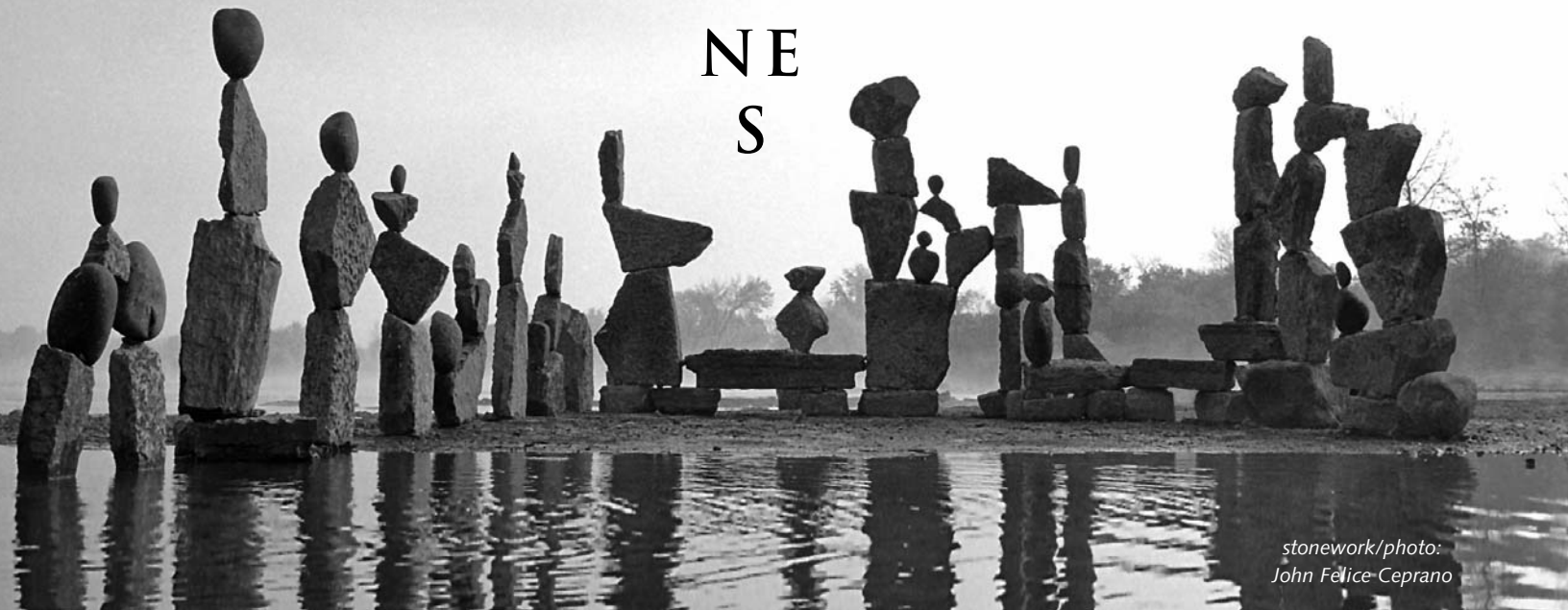


THE
ART OF
BALAN
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stonework/photo:
John Felice-Ceprano

by Tomas Lipps

ROCK IS

an enduring material. We stonemasons assemble pieces of this obdurate stuff—STONES—with the intention that they stay assembled for as long as possible. Stability is the goal, to produce an enduring structure.

A BALANCE OF MATTER,
A MATTER OF BALANCE

To spend time and effort in the act of putting stone upon stone in ephemeral configurations so delicately balanced that a breeze or the alighting of a bird is enough to bring them down them is an activity that is marvelously absurd—and totally engaging. Balancing stones requires sensitivity, poise, physical coordination and a concentration of attention that results in what might be termed an existential state of being. It is, or can be, meditation, a physical feat, a creative challenge, an art.

The impulse to put stones upon other stones is instinctive. Killing, cutting, cooking, and building were not the only uses early man found for stone. It was also a means of expression. Marking ter-

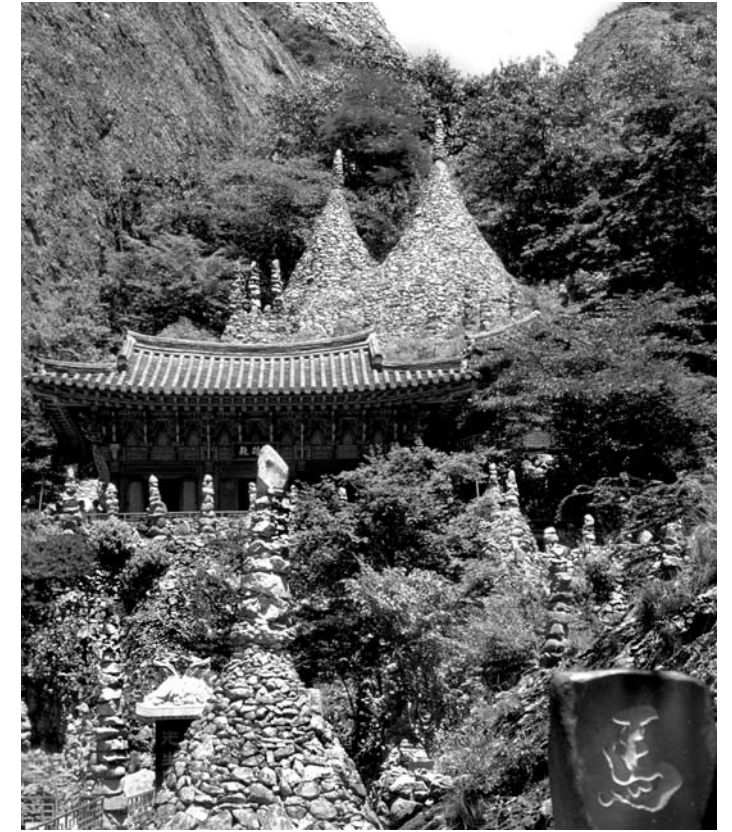
rain and trails, making significant configurations, were other purposes for which stone was “handy.”

A cairn, whether a built pillar or two or three stacked stones, is a purposive statement. Upright stones, whether erected, built, stacked or balanced evince a presence quite distinct from the unarticulated *prima materia*. In Asia—in Tibet, Japan and South Korea, for instance—stones are stacked as the embodiment of a prayer. In Canada and Alaska, stones were, and are still, used to build free-standing dry stone totemic figures, called *inukshuk*. These serve as surrogate human presences that help to herd reindeer, and as friendly landmarks in a vast, lonely and nearly featureless landscape.

There is no physical evidence that the activity at issue here, defying gravity with delicately balanced assemblages, has a long history, but inherent human creativity and playfulness, and the fascination with which naturally occurring balanced rocks and stones are regarded, argues that it must be so.



Lake Mansarovar, Western Tibet. photo: Julie Kandyba



above right: At the Tapso Temple on Korea's Mt. Maisan, there are some 80 stone towers or pagodas that were erected in the early 1900's by a hermit/monk named Yi Kap-ryong. He carefully piled hundreds of rocks atop one another as a personal prayer for peace; no mortar was used. Stone by stone, working only at night and without any mechanical help, he spent more than ten years creating these pagoda shaped piles—some as much as 10 meters high!

The stone towers have stood for over 100 years, withstanding the forces of strong wind, rain and typhoons that have uprooted trees in the area.

Yi's daughter-in-law maintained that he could never have completed such a feat without the help of a heavenly spirit who descended to Earth each night to help him build the towers. The pagodas are said to be an extension of salvation for mankind to strengthen the spirit. Each tower was built of stones selected and carried from one of several mountains and rivers through-out Korea.

Yi died at the age of 98; the stone towers endure as a mountainside testament of manifest spiritual devotion.



Jeju Island Temple, South Korea
photo: Elliott Henry

Also at Tapso Temple:
pagoda style prayer stone stacks
photos: Patrick King

DANCES WITH STONES

A small but spirited and wide-ranging societal subset with a shared interest in this activity has come into existence. Stone balancing is becoming established as a category of creative activity, like music, painting or sculpture. There is, as with those activities, a wide range of involvement, from mere dabbling—stacks of stone in the front yard—to “High Art”—art gallery and museum exhibits and coffee-table books.

The transition from archetypal activity to a contemporaneous popular art form has resulted in what might be called the ‘Modern Era’ of stone balancing, a phenomenon that can be said to have begun late in the last century. It was, evidently, a popular pastime at Rainbow Gatherings in the 70’s. A photograph in an article in a 1984 issue of the National Geographic magazine showed a gentleman quietly stacking black stone ‘Buddha spires’ in a creek somewhere in Big Sur, California.

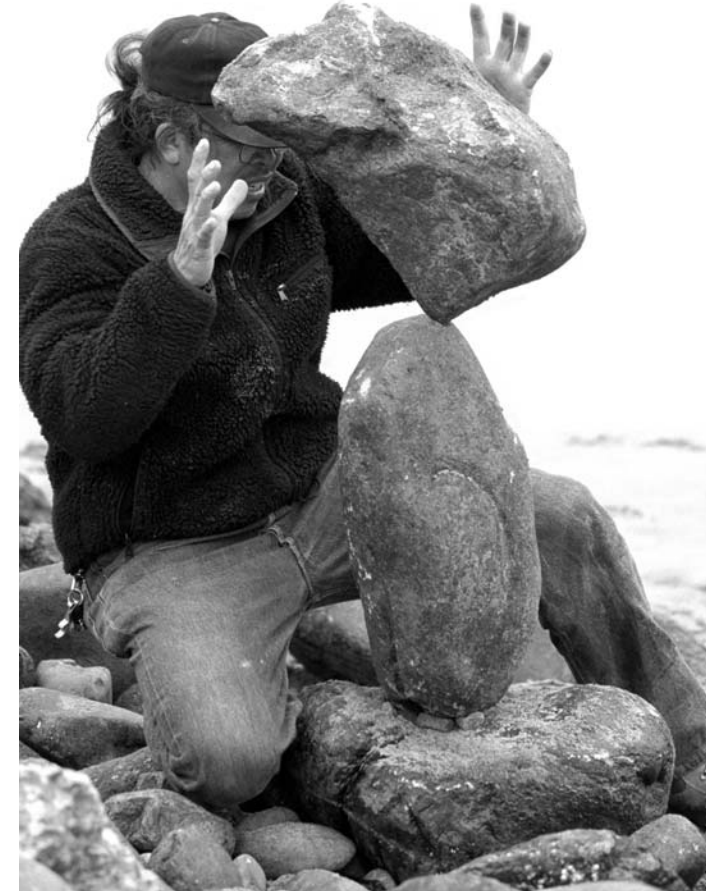
Yes, in a creek. Water is the great quarrier and the banks and beds of creeks and rivers, lake shores and rocky sea coasts with the abundance of stone exposed were, and are, potential theatres of operation for a growing number of stone balancers.

Stone balancing is done for various motives, as a meditation, as art, as recreation, as an occupation or an avocation, as creative play or exhibitionism. It is performed in public by some and done privately by others. The former often accept, and sometimes solicit, money in appreciation for their feats of balance. The latter often do theirs in unpeopled places and then photograph them *a la Goldsworthy* before leaving them to their inevitable collapse. (Though some, acting on personal principle, return each stone to its original resting place.)



above: Deva Manfredo balancing, Mt. Labbro, Tuscany, Italy

left: Elizabeth Foley balancing, Seattle, Washington. photo: Jeff Leck



Bill Dan balancing, San Francisco, California
photo: Frederic Neema

Darryl Maddeaux balancing, Toronto, Canada
photo: Elson T. Elizaga



THE HUNDREDTH MONKEY THEORY

The Japanese monkey, *Macaca fuscata*, had been observed in the wild for a period of over 30 years. In 1952, on the Island of Koshima, scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes dropped in the sand. The monkeys liked the taste of the raw sweet potatoes, but found the dirt unpleasant. An 18 month old female named Imo found she could solve the problem by washing the potatoes in the salty ocean water, improving the taste of the potato. She taught this trick to her mother. Her playmates learned this trick and taught their mothers too. This cultural innovation was gradually picked up by numerous monkeys in the troop and observed by the scientists.

Between 1952 and 1958, all the young monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes and make them more palatable. Only the adults who imitated their children learned this cultural improvement. Other adult monkeys kept eating the dirty sweet potatoes. In autumn of 1958, something startling took place. A certain number of Koshima monkeys were already washing their sweet potatoes, the exact number is not known. The hypothetical number given was 99. Then it happened. The hundredth monkey learned to wash the sweet potatoes. The added energy of that hundredth monkey somehow created an ideological breakthrough. Almost everyone in the tribe was washing their potatoes before eating them, but a surprising occurrence was observed by these scientists. The habit of washing the sweet potato had jumped overseas. Colonies of monkeys on other islands and the mainland troop at Takaskiyama began washing their sweet potatoes.

Although the exact number may vary, this Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon means that when only a limited number of individuals knows a ‘new way’, it remains the conscious property of those individuals. However, when one more individual manifests this new awareness, the field is strengthened, a critical mass is reached, and the awareness becomes the conscious property of all. This new awareness is communicated mind to mind.

by Ken Keyes Jr.

Something similar seems to have happened world-wide with stone balancing.

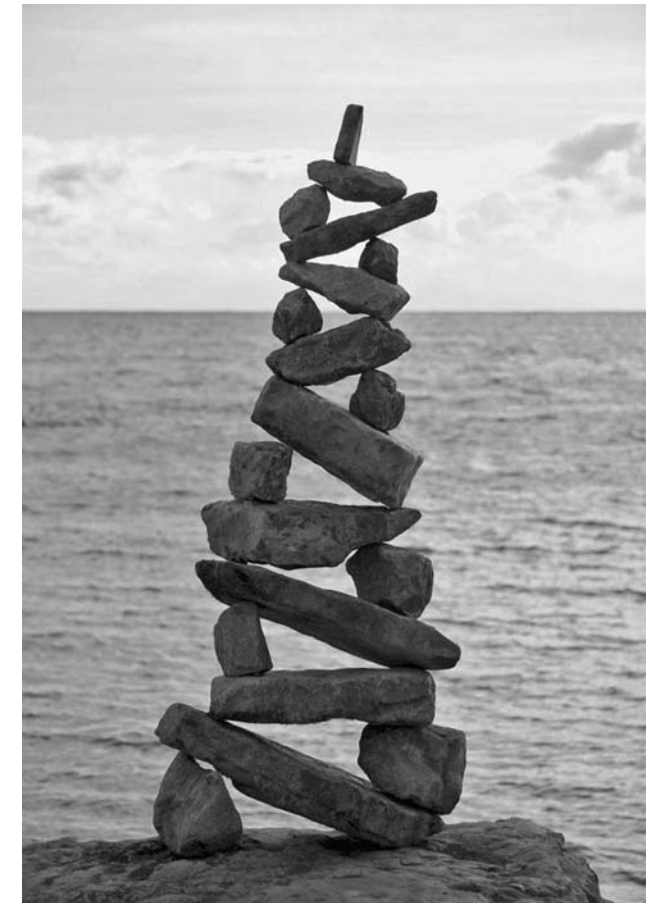




stones/photo: Jonas Jungblut



“Everything, rocks and other solid objects or anything else, have their inua (inner person). Anything that is made or created has an inua.”
Hubert Amarualik, Inuit elder



stones/photos, top left and above: Peter Riedel

George Quasha, from his book, Axial Stones, an art of precarious balance, published by North Atlantic. photos: Sherry Williams





above: *Island of Hydra, Greece*

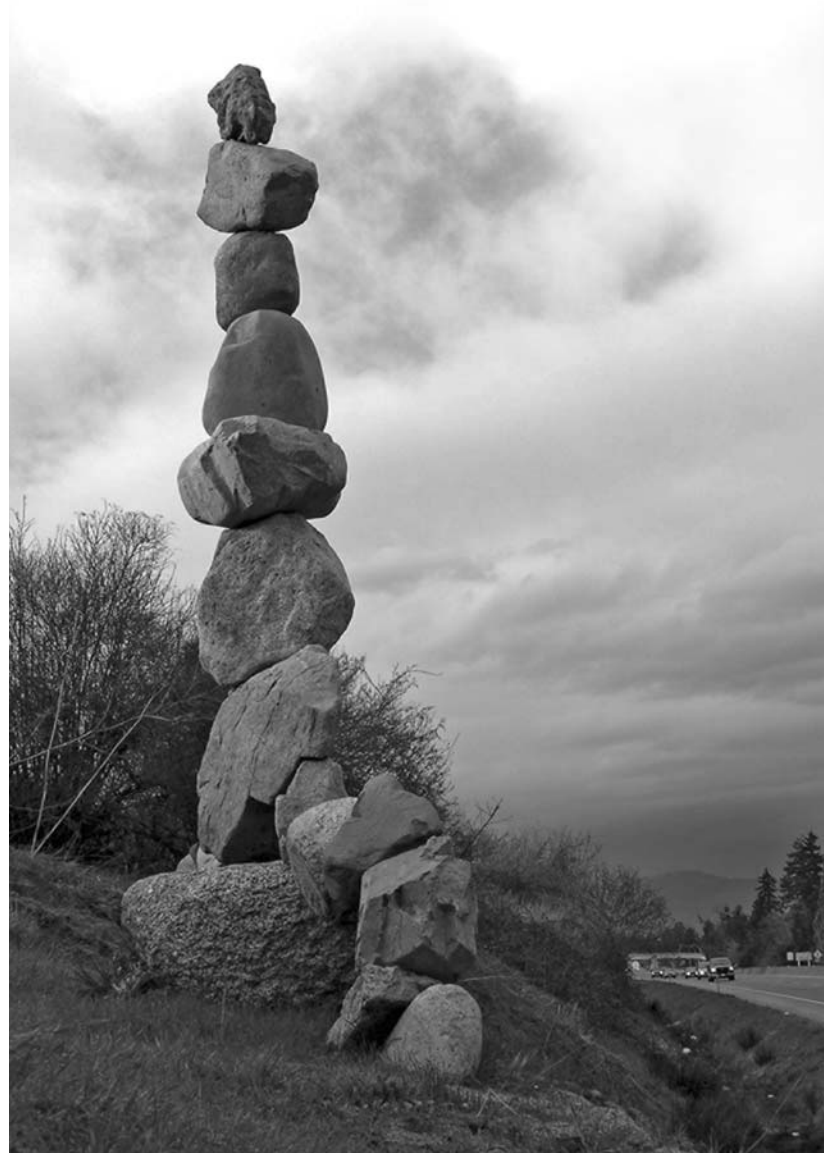
stones/photos: *Tom S. Thomas*

Capilano River, British Columbia, Canada



stones/photos: *Zach Pine, Muir Beach, California*

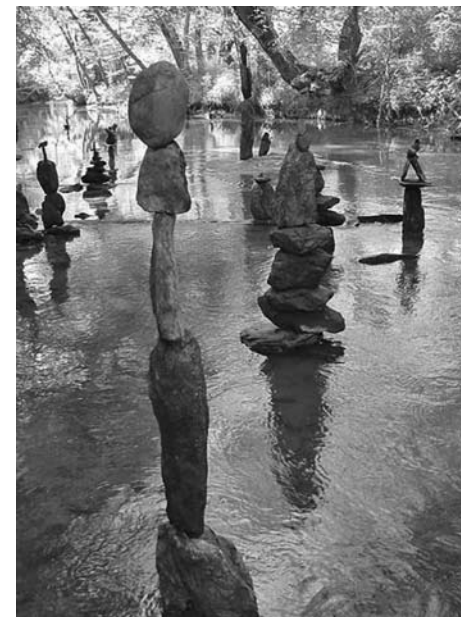




above: stones/photos: Stephen Goulet
 left: Stephen Goulet and Glen McConnell,
 Highway 17, Vancouver, British Columbia

below right: stones/photo, John Felice Ceprano,
 Ontario River, Canada

below left: stones/photos, Elizabeth Foley and Len Othick



The 'Western North Carolina Rockstackers,' a group of friends and neighbors have embraced the activity of stone balancing in a way unique to them.

Individually, they enhance their properties with 'yard art,' stacks of stones that, in a few cases, number between fifty and a hundred.

Collectively, they occasionally gather for convivial group 'stackathons,' friendly creek-side affairs with food and drink that result in the creation of a menagerie of stone 'critters.'





stones/photo: Daliel Leite, Hawaii



stones/photo: Daliel Leite, Portugal

THE STORY OF HOW I GOT STARTED

in this rock thing goes like this: in the process of collecting stones for a flower bed in our front yard, I noticed that the stones were killing patches of grass. It occurred to me one day that if I stacked them on top of one another, I would make fewer brown spots on the yard. So I did.

Soon I began making all kinds of stacks. I began to thrive on that moment when nothing else in the whole world mattered except for making Stone C stand on Stone B, which in turn, stood on Stone A.

A year earlier I had quit drinking and found that I had restless hands and a desire to create things. The flowerbed became a terraced rock-n-sedum affair with tons of collected rocks — arches, stacks, walls and some collectibles and sentimental favorites. Stacking became my passion.

I like to stack things in somewhat busy places and listen to the comments of passersby, or visit places I have stacked to find that visitors have left contributions. Doing something I enjoy that brightens others' day makes for a good past-time, I think.

I progressed from Stone C on B on A to what I call "dependent balances," in which Stone B would not stand on Stone A without the weight of Stone C on it. Arches came next and remain a favorite construction.

More and more I see myself chasing those intense magic moments of precarious balance at some risk to my personal safety (two trips to ER so far, but I like to think I am getting wiser as I get older.)

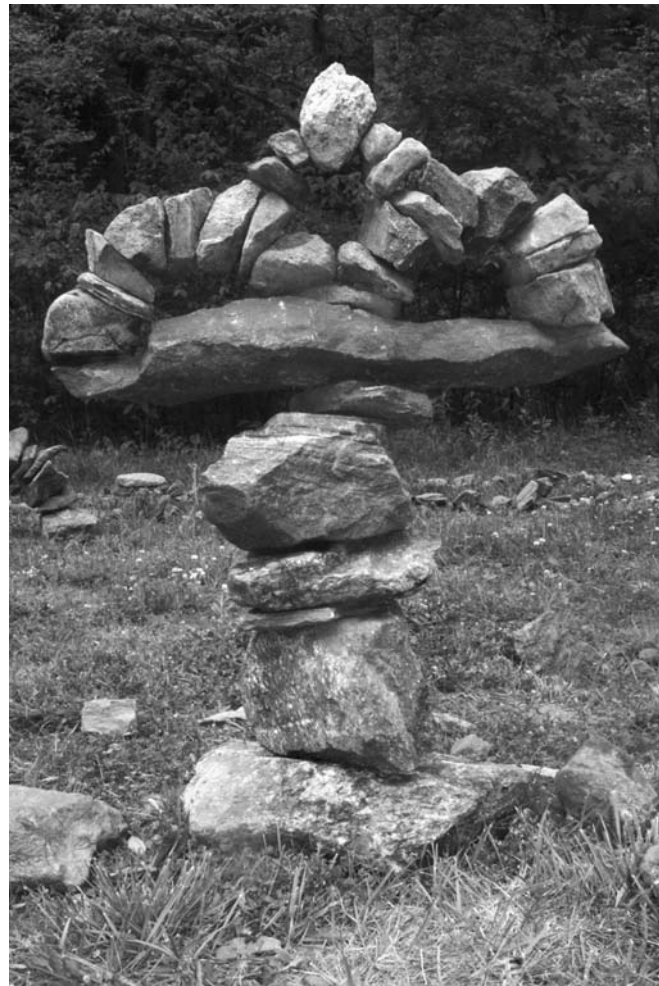
I consider the Arch-on-Pedestal, shown here, to be my signature stack. It combines the three disciplines I employ in my work — stacking, balancing and building.

STACKING because the pedestal is stacked and the most important part of the stack.

BALANCING because you have to put equal amounts of weight on each side of the shelf, the horizontal piece that supports the arch, at all times.

BUILDING because that is what I consider making arches. Arching is not exactly stacking or balancing.

Dave Russell



THE STANDING STONES OF BARGA

by a barganews.com reporter, 27th August 2001

A mysterious phenomenon has come this summer to one small stream in the Garfagnana, Italy - stone balancing.

Strange figure-like constructions stand guard, immobile, along a rushing stream near the Tuscan hill-top town of Barga. Some appear to be in an almost human form, others are like birds. What makes them unusual is that nothing holds these towers of stones together except gravity. No cement. No glue. Not even a small pile of sand comes between the naked stones, one piled upon another. Improbable feats of balance, one long pearl-shaped stone stands - upside down as it were - on another. Three on top of each other here. Four there. Five. All suspended, as if for eternity. But the reality is much more fragile: the most miniscule change can send them all toppling back into the stream. A strong breeze, the merest touch, a failed attempt to add another to the already unlikely construction and the work is destroyed.

One large slab of rock has several egg-shaped stones of various sizes all precariously perched along its ridge - and some others cling to one of its sides, which looks easier to achieve - until you try to add to it yourself. Long lozenges of rock balanced on a tip have had smaller rounder stones balanced on their tops, giving them almost the appearance of human figures. In places three or four are clustered together in small family groups. You are irresistibly reminded of the stone heads of Easter Island, or the creations of Brancusi, or Epstein or Barbara Hepworth or Henry Moore - isolated, impenetrable, silent.

Even the inevitable attempts at representations of those parts of the human anatomy generally kept decently covered have a kind of primitive charm, and no little skill in the realisation.

And who is doing all this work? No one knows.

It appears it was started some weeks ago by someone who lives nearby, but then others who have happened upon this somewhat remote spot have continued the installation, and now dozens of these statue-like constructions stand along a hundred-metre stretch of the stream. Almost everyone who comes seems to want to add to this exhibition, with however small a contribution.

One of those who has added to the creation of this free art gallery talked about the experience.

"It is almost mystical," he said, "to feel a sudden realisation of an improbable equilibrium. The most unexpected alliances can be achieved, and as you gently move the stone on top you can somehow sense whether the two can make a happy alliance. You try one way, then another, you feel it might just be possible, then the most tiny of adjustments and it suddenly locks into place. You begin to set fresh challenges for yourself, and look for bigger and more improbable stones to try and balance on top of others.

"The whole thing is so ephemeral, and yet it has an appearance of permanence. Sometimes the equilibrium is so fine that if it has been achieved when one of the stones has still been wet from the stream, it can be lost as the sun dries out the stone, and you hear one that ten minutes ago was standing quite firm suddenly tumble into the water again."

The only thing for certain is that this unique display is transitory. The wind and the water will soon take away all this work. A salute, therefore, to all those who unselfishly and anonymously have given their time and the creative effort into creating a park of spontaneous free-standing sculpture in this secret place that will pass, with summer, into only a fond memory.



stones: Kent Avery, Vancouver, B.C.
photo: Craig Campbell



Built, then balanced. The drystone plinth on which the balanced stones stand identify this as the work of a stonemason. Stonemasons are particularly vulnerable to the attraction of stone balancing. To use stone in this sensitive, playful, creative and impractical way is recreational. Building with stone or rock does not become as automatic as building with block or brick can be, but it can be done with less than complete attention. In balancing stones, however, total concentration on the task at hand is required.

As you might assume from the foregoing, I have succumbed to the allure of stone balancing. As a stonemason, though, I am tempted to circumvent the taboos which I suppose to exist against 1) shimming, and 2) altering the form of a stone, both of which are skills basic to our craft. To shim or not to shim IS the question. A tiny shim, a stone flake the size of a fingernail, placed just so could make the impossible possible. Bruising one stone with another to remove an impediment to equilibrium serves too.

George Quasha, author of Axial Stones, for instance, follows strict rules: "one stone must be balanced on another, at a narrow point of contact, and no adhesive is permissible nor may either stone be modified in any way." John Felice Ceprano shims without shame; his monumental tableaus must stay in place throughout the summer. Dave Russell (see p 48) differentiates between balancing, stacking and building, sometimes employing all three activities in a single piece.

T L

For whatever ostensible reason people balance stones, there are three essential aspects that draw them to it: (1) the collaboration with nature, the intersection of the life of stone and the life of man; (2) the creative challenge and the satisfaction of meeting it; and (3) what might be called The Moment, the aforementioned 'existential' state of being, the concentrated attention required to achieve balance. (You must be present to win.)

The people who do this, the lithic equilibrists, let's call them, are as interesting as what they do. A sampling would include artists who have found another medium in which to work, poets, several photographers, software designers, doctors, a nurse, a newspaper editor, a private detective, construction workers and, of course, stonemasons. Profiles, even simple character sketches of the individuals responsible for the examples shown on these pages, would make for interesting reading, but, unfortunately, would require more space than is available here; a book could be written about them—and IT.

Public awareness of stone balancing has been broadened by the Internet. Many practitioners have web sites where they can be visited—by each other as well as a curious public. And, there is www.rock-on-rock-on.com. Daliel Leite, a San Francisco Bay Area, was so impressed by watching Bill Dan, a virtuoso balancer whose base of operations is near the Golden Gate Bridge, that he was inspired to begin balancing himself. His enthusiasm for the activity later led him to set up the website.

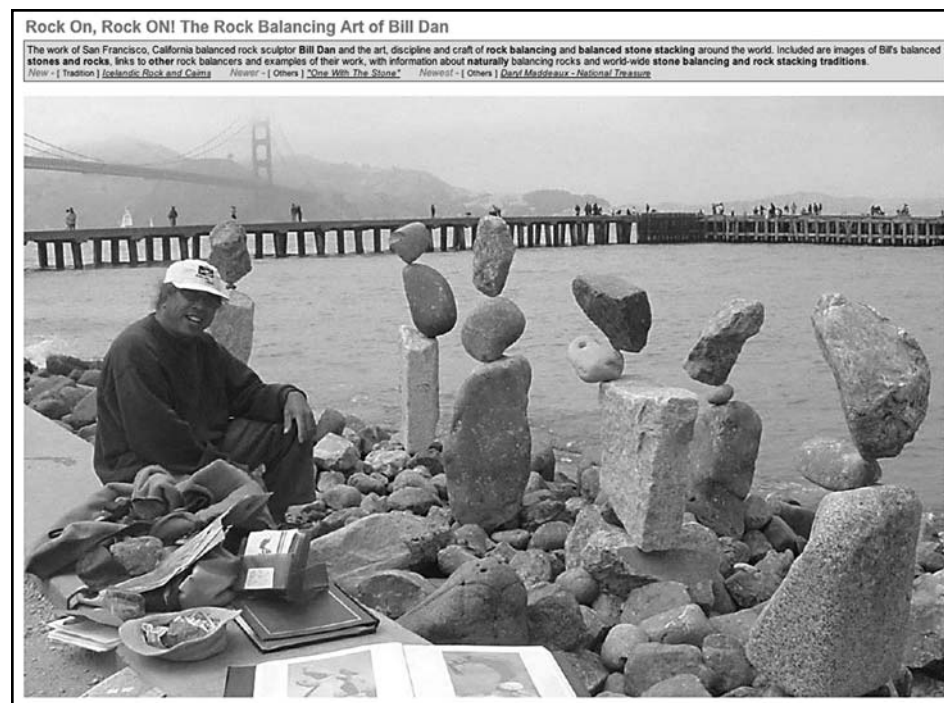
Initially it show-cased Bill's work, but gradually evolved into a celebration of the activity of stone or rock balancing and a nexus for a growing community of stone balancers. It is a survey of contemporary stone balancing and a repository of images and personal reflections on the nature of the act by individual stone balancers. Most of the balancers represented in this article are members of the rock-on-rock-on.com community and more images and information about them, and others, can be seen there.

Part of the appeal of stone balancing is that no training or tools are required and the material is abundant and free. If you feel compelled to practice this 'art,' remember, stones can bite! Be careful.

Some discretion is advised as to where and how one might choose to balance stones. In parks and wilderness areas where folks go to appreciate nature, balanced stones might seem out-of-place and cause offense. Arcadia National Park in Maine, for instance, implores hikers to please NOT build cairns. "LEAVE THE MOUNTAIN AND ROCKS AS YOU FIND THEM" says the signage. Be sensitive.

The more precarious the balance, the more remarkable—and satisfying—the result. To achieve balance in this way, if only briefly, is to feel balanced in one's self, if only briefly.

As Bill Dan says, "Be Balance."



Rock On, Rock ON! The Rock Balancing Art of Bill Dan
 The work of San Francisco, California balanced rock sculptor Bill Dan and the art, discipline and craft of rock balancing and balanced stone stacking around the world. Included are images of Bill's balanced stones and rocks, links to other rock balancers and examples of their work, with information about naturally balancing rocks and world-wide stone balancing and rock stacking traditions.
 View - Tradition | Balance, Rock and Cairns | View - Owners | One With The Stone | View - Owners | David Maddeaux - National Treasure



Ring of Fire, stones/photo: Jim Needham



stones/photo: Dave Russell, Morro Bay, California

THE ART OF STONE BALANCING:

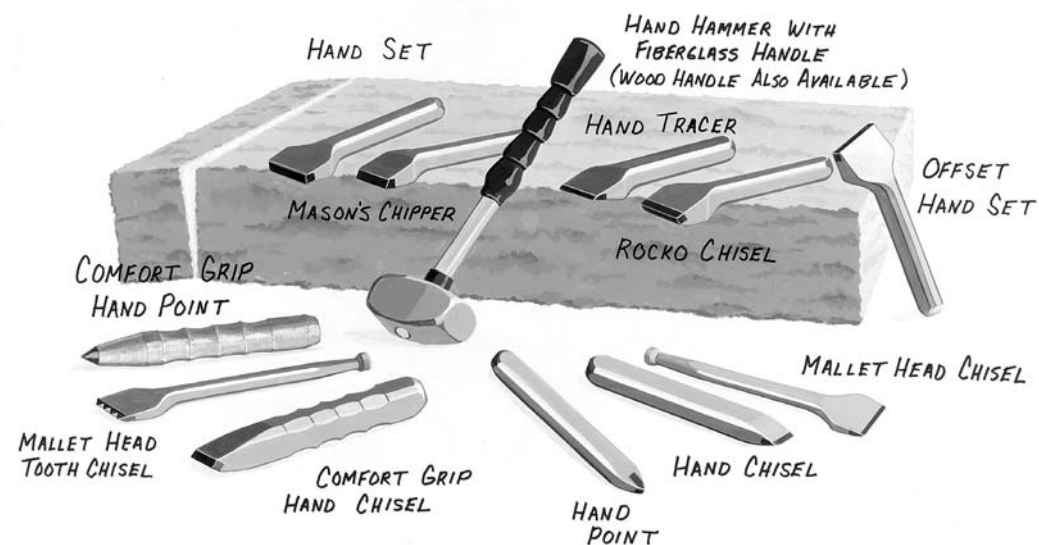
BALANCERS:

- Jean Felice Ceprano www.jfceprano.com
- Bill Dan, www.rock-on-rock-on.com
- Stephen Goulet, www.klatu.com/lix/rockatier
- Elizabeth Foley/Len Othick, www.artoflivingrocks.com
- Jonas Jongblut, www.rockbalance.blogspot.com
- Daliel Leite, www.rock-on-rock-on.com
- Deva Manfredo, www.devamanfredo-stoneart.com
- Jim Needham, www.rockstacker.com
- Zach Pine, www.naturesculpture.com
- Peter Riedel, www.peterriedelphotography.com
- Dave Russell, www.myavantgarden.squarespace.com

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